Lifta's Ruins

The Presence of Absence

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Abstract

The case of the depopulated village of Lifta complicates the terms and concepts of ruins, tangible and intangible heritage, memory, identity, and return. This article attempts to shed light on Lifta's ruins from an archaeological perspective and reads ruins as incomplete texts that call for rewriting. This rewriting, I claim, unmasks gaps in heritage concepts and discourses that cannot capture memory, social practices, and material findings in a complex reality. I argue that the interplay between presence and absence makes Lifta into a living heritage site and a concrete testimony to traditions and meanings that unfold anew in every tour or memory practice. These practices constitute a compensatory mechanism for the awaited return, which have been mobilizing Liftawis and others to save Lifta. Further, these practices have made the archaeological remains into a polymer that binds Lifta's displaced and dispersed descendants in a renewed social contract/commitment, whose ultimate focus is the notion of Return.

Keywords

Palestine; Lifta; archaeology; Nakba; loss; memory; living heritage; spatial agency.

In 1948, more than seven hundred thousand Palestinians were forced out of their homes. Today, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), there are more than five million registered refugees in

the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.[1] Each of those refugees has memories of the events surrounding 1948. Some lived through the events themselves, and some have had the events evoked through the memories of their parents and relatives.

Liftawis – the descendants of Lifta – like all other Palestinian refugees wherever they settled, kept their villages and towns of origin alive through social and spatial practices: by collecting oral histories; holding commemoration events; sketching maps and family genealogy trees; naming neighborhoods, streets, facilities, and businesses in virtually all refugee camps after their village of origin. However, Liftawi refugees are a unique case because of the status of themselves and their village today. The case of Lifta complicates the terms and concepts of ruins, heritage, living heritage, memory, identity, and return. This article attempts to shed light on Lifta's ruins from an archaeological perspective and reads ruins as incomplete texts that call for rewriting. This rewriting unmasks gaps in heritage concepts that cannot capture memory, social practices, and material findings in a complex reality.

Lifta and Liftawis

So, what makes Lifta a unique case in Palestine displacement history? First of all, Lifta may be one of the very few, if not the only, depopulated Palestinian village that was not totally destroyed during the 1948 battles or shortly after the Nakba, as befell the four hundred Palestinian villages in what is present-day Israel. Secondly, although the modern parts of the town have been occupied from 1948 until now, the historic part of Lifta was not occupied by Jewish settlers (except briefly by Moroccan Jews before moving elsewhere).[2] This has made the historic core into a time capsule, a testimony – in stone – of rural Palestine during its transformation by the modernization processes of the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire – signaled by the construction boom that radiated from Lifta's historic core toward the city of Jerusalem as the urban and the civic center of the district.

Thirdly, Liftawis were expelled outside the Israeli-controlled territory during the war and resettled in Jordanian-ruled Palestine (1948–67), mainly in Jerusalem and Ramallah. Unlike the inhabitants of 'Ayn Hawd (ten kilometers south of Haifa) and Kawkab Abu al-Hayja' (in the lower Galilee), who remained in the vicinity of their villages after their involuntary removal from their homes, the Liftawis were removed and expelled beyond the borders of Israel as defined by the armistice line after the 1948 War.[3]

Fourthly, while most Palestinian refugees settled in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, many Liftawi refugees moved to nearby village lands that were located in the Jerusalem area under Jordanian rule. After 1967 and Israel's occupation of the remaining territory of Palestine, Liftawis gained a legal status not common among most Palestinian refugees. Liftawis, in accordance with the Israeli "Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel," passed by the Israeli Knesset (parliament) on 30 July 1980, acquired the status of *permanent residents of Israel* and gained many of the

social entitlements that are exclusive to Israeli citizens, namely, blue ID cards, yellow license plates for cars, social security, and universal health care, as well as the right to vote in the municipal council elections, or apply for a full citizenship status (although Jerusalemites rarely exercised the last two rights, which are intended, according to Palestinians, to normalize the illegal colonization of Palestine). As such, Liftawis are in a bizarre legal status: they are residents of Israel and yet are not allowed to return to their village of origin *in* Israel.

Lastly, their ability to access their village of origin due to their acquired Jerusalem resident status after 1967 allowed them to witness the steadily deteriorating state of their homes, and to monitor the Israeli attempts to convert their village into a Jewish neighborhood. Over the last twenty years, the families from Lifta organized themselves and mobilized to try and save their village, one of the few cases of Palestinian refugees – displaced and not allowed to return – who persevered to keep their village ties.[4]

Liftawis: "Present Absentees"

But why is it impossible to return to one's own home only a few kilometers from one's current residence? "Present absentees" is not a metaphor, but a term used to explain why Liftawis cannot return to their original homes although they are living in their vicinity. About two million Palestinians live within Israel's post-1948 borders, including the more than two hundred thousand descendants of the Palestinians who were removed from their villages after the 1948 War, but who managed to remain inside the newly established State of Israel.[5] Those Palestinians have been struggling for the recognition of their right to return to their villages of origin as citizens of Israel,[6] alongside the inhabitants of around one hundred Arab villages – about 20 percent of the total – that escaped being depopulated or destroyed but that lost over 80 percent of their lands to Israeli government confiscation.[7]

The Israeli "Absentees' Property Law, 5710-1950" framed the definition of "absentee" to ensure that it applied to every Palestinian or resident who had left his usual place of residence in Palestine for any place inside or outside the country after the adoption of the partition of Palestine resolution by the United Nations (1947). According to the 1950 Law, Article 4 (a)(2): "Every right an absentee had in any property shall pass automatically to the Custodian [of Absentee Property] at the time of the vesting of the property; and the status of the Custodian shall be the same as was that of the owner of the property." The wholesale transfer of property to the State of Israel has been popularly framed as "the biggest robbery of the twentieth century."[8]

Stripping Palestinians of their landed property was, and still is, part of the protracted Israeli colonial process that includes control, surveillance, management, and exploitation of the indigenous peoples' resources and properties. The colonial practices toward citizens and subjects underpin discriminatory policies towards the indigenous people in terms of property and mobility rights, transforming them into daily wage laborers deployable in the colonial state's modes of production.[9] In Palestine, differential policies between citizens and subjects became amplified in July 2018 when

Israel adopted a law confirming Israel as "the nation state of the Jewish people." The new legislation fundamentally discriminates against non-Jewish citizens by stating that "the right to exercise national self-determination" in Israel is "unique to the Jewish people." The new law establishes Hebrew as Israel's official language and downgrades Arabic – the language of Palestinians inside present-day Israel – to a "special status." It recognizes "Jewish settlement as a national value" and mandates that the state "will labor to encourage and promote its establishment and development."[10]

Reading "Loss": A Methodological Problem

There is a methodological dilemma facing those who try to study the depopulated or destroyed Palestinian villages: namely, that they study structures, materials, landscapes and typologies in isolation from the history and social systems that produced them and gave them their attributes and value. Separating the buildings and the landscapes around them from the historical processes of production turns ruins into the product of an unknown producer, the crude material found in natural history museums with abstract (aesthetic and historic) descriptions detached from their context.

In other words, we, as researchers, do an injustice to the history of depopulated villages when we emphasize either the materiality or immateriality of loss. Instead, I call for reconsideration of both by means of research methods that investigate "the remains" (showing emptiness and absence) in order to unearth a complete story (expressing abundance and presence). This means that the absence of buildings, structures, and elements is turned into a question about "loss," which becomes a question about indigenous individual and collective ownership. This question, in turn, can be employed in mobilizing public opinion about identity and political rights, and the right of return to one's home village.

Another methodological problem concerning reading loss is that "the ruins of Lifta" do not reflect what Lifta was at the time of the displacement, before the destruction and the dramatic changes of Palestinian landscapes in the 1948 Nakba. Likewise, the ruins of Lifta do not reflect what Lifta would have evolved into today, had there been no Nakba. This is a question that cannot be answered through comparisons or through the application of standardized planning and statistical models, because every town and village had its own circumstances and conditions that would have led to a different reality.

Nevertheless, the description of the ruins of Lifta is of great importance, as are the attempts to find out the details of what had been lost. As in criminology, every destroyed or depopulated site is a crime scene that carries within it the fingerprints of the perpetrator, and shows the type of injury that was committed against the victim – the site itself. This investigatory method, popularly coined "forensic architecture" as a field of practice within the context of the prosecution of war crimes, and as "an operative concept and analytical method for probing the events and histories inscribed in spatial artifacts and in the built environments," has gained recognition among researchers and practitioners who try to reconstruct spatial crime scenes. [11]

These methods try to solve a crime scene in which no witnesses survived but the material evidence: things, tools, and structures, human and non-human remains. Investigators interrogate these to weave a narrative about "what happened" and about "what would have happened" This new narrative brings together *presence* and *absence* to form a more accurate and coherent account of the scene.

Presence of Absence: A Heuristic Device

How do we account for absence? How do we read a crime scene? How can loss be productive in our endeavor to restore the story of a town like Lifta? These questions and a few others guide my article.

I am using the "presence of absence" as a heuristic device rather than the metaphorical one envisioned by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In his book *In the Presence of Absence,* Darwish states, "In memory, there are enough beautification instruments to hold the place in place," noting the power and the faculty inherent in the act of remembering, to process the traumatic events of the Nakba.[12] I take this further to suggest that remembering and writing anew of these events through the memories of the elders and through the ruins of their homes, becomes an ethical obligation, a responsibility, a political (f)act. In the absence of the beloved, practicing remembering can bring the loss to the fore.

As known in the field of archaeology, archaeological heritage is twofold: the material culture, which is all that is found *in situ*: structures, materials and tools, human and non-human remains; and the "standard" ethnographic account (or the symbolic or non-material culture), which is the logical and scientific explanation that reconstructs all that is found *in situ* into a socio-economic, politico-cultural system replete with relations, customs, traditions, beliefs, symbols, modes of production and reproduction. In the ethnographic account of Lifta, the mosque and the shrine are places of religious activity linking the physical and the metaphysical worlds. A peasant house is the farming family's castle, which embraces their domestic animals, agricultural tools and family in one cubical vernacular duplex. The mills and the olive presses are the production units of flour and olive oil. The house of the *mukhtar* (shaykh/chief) is an expression of power acquired in a complex socio-political field. The spring/pool is a meeting place for women and the source of life for the inhabitants of Lifta as well as for the irrigated orchards and crops. The agricultural platforms and terraces that contain almond and olive trees are the result of perseverance and long years of work adapting the steep topography to become suitable cultivated lands. The cemetery, near the water spring, is a constant reminder of the vulnerability of human life.

Neither the present Lifta nor the absent one can be reduced to terraces, houses, and structures. These are symbols for networks, power relations, gendered spaces, and complex social arrangements that are manifested in, and through, space and form.

Therefore, the question of absence becomes an issue of how can ruins acquire an agency beyond the museumization of memory. Heritage as a European concept and

creation is concerned primarily with the material world, despite attempts to bring attention to intangible heritage or living dimensions of material culture.[13] The concept of "living heritage," which has been gaining some momentum, calls for acknowledging that heritage is "the result of a historical and social process of selection" and that heritage as part of culture is "politically constructed." [14] It emphasizes "the shift from [an] archival documentation paradigm to one that stresses the importance of reproduction and transmission of practices."[15] As a matter of fact, the artificial divides between tangible and intangible, dead and living heritage, the monumental and the mundane, the built and unbuilt, art and architecture, culture and nature are heavily critiqued.[16] Therefore, the present Lifta and the absent one, the ruins and the memory, the historic center and the surrounding landscapes are one complex entity that needs to be understood as such.

In what follows, I will read the structure and architecture of Lifta as a crime scene that calls for new ways of reading/looking. I will briefly describe the ruins of Lifta and then use the material culture, through examples, to raise questions about absence and to read loss as an ethical-political methodological shift.

Lifta: Structure and Architecture

What survived from Lifta's built form does not lend us a comprehensive plan of what Lifta was before the Nakba.[17] However, Lifta's ruins suggest it was a medium-sized town, whose architecture is infused with urban elements, evidence of the town's connection to Jerusalem and of its prosperity and economic vitality.

Lifta, like most traditional Palestinian towns and villages, shares its identity with the environment and seems to merge with the surrounding topography. A study of the British Mandate map of Lifta (1928) shows the presence of three neighborhoods separated from each other by agricultural terraces: the northern neighborhood (the historic core), defined on the Mandate map as "Lifta," and the southern neighborhood, which is composed of separate houses located around the water spring, and indicated on the map as "the pool." There is the western extension, with dispersed houses, indicated on the Mandate map as "Taht al-Balad" (literally, under the town*)*, perhaps a reference to the Jewish colony of Givat Shaul (see figure 1). The cemetery separates the spring/pool area from the Taht al-Balad area. We also note the presence of small service buildings on the agricultural terraces between the pool area and Taht al-Balad.

From the same British Mandate map, it is clear that the oldest part of the town is the core, with crowded and attached buildings interspersed with narrow alleys and streets, while the urban expansion of the historic core toward the Batn al-Hawa' (Belly of the Wind) valley to the north is less dense. Likewise, the urban expansion towards the pool, which mostly consists of single buildings, decreases in density and diverges the further we move southward from the core.

A plausible explanation for the fact that buildings are stacked around the historic core and scattered around the spring is that the presence of ancient buildings formed

a natural quarry for the construction of the town's core; in addition, the use of older structures served as foundations for newer buildings. As a matter of fact, the location of Lifta, the core and its extension, was also delineated by ecological and geographic factors, especially the proximity to agricultural lands and water resources on the one hand, and the distance from the valley on the other. The builders avoided construction on lands with significant mountainous slopes, especially those that slope toward the south: the slopes of al-M'arsha (the Trellis), Wadi al-Ghul (Valley of the Beast), and Khallat al-Tarha (Land of the Veil), which today form the Jewish settlement of Romema to the east. With the passage of time, the town's cemetery became a physical barrier between the northern and southern neighborhoods, and the western neighborhood.

Figure 1. British Mandate map (1937–1944). Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

The sharp slopes to the east and south made it more logical to expand toward

the north and west, a continuation of the traditional planning scheme of the town, which relied on continuous terraces in the north-south and east-west directions. In this scheme, the areas near the valley, as is the case in most of rural Palestine, were reserved for agricultural activities. Lifta's urban expansion toward the east (today's Romema neighborhood) and toward the south (today's Givat Shaul neighborhood) came to an end with the Nakba (1948).

Among the interesting elements in the town are the numerous houses of shaykhs (*makhatir*), the industrial facilities related to agriculture (especially olive presses), and the presence of more than one covered alley (*qantara*) within the dense historic core of the town. The presence of covered alleys, and the breaking of building corners to widen alleys where roads turn so that pedestrian mobility within the town is facilitated, show that Lifta followed a traditional planning scheme to make the town easy to navigate and connected to its surroundings.

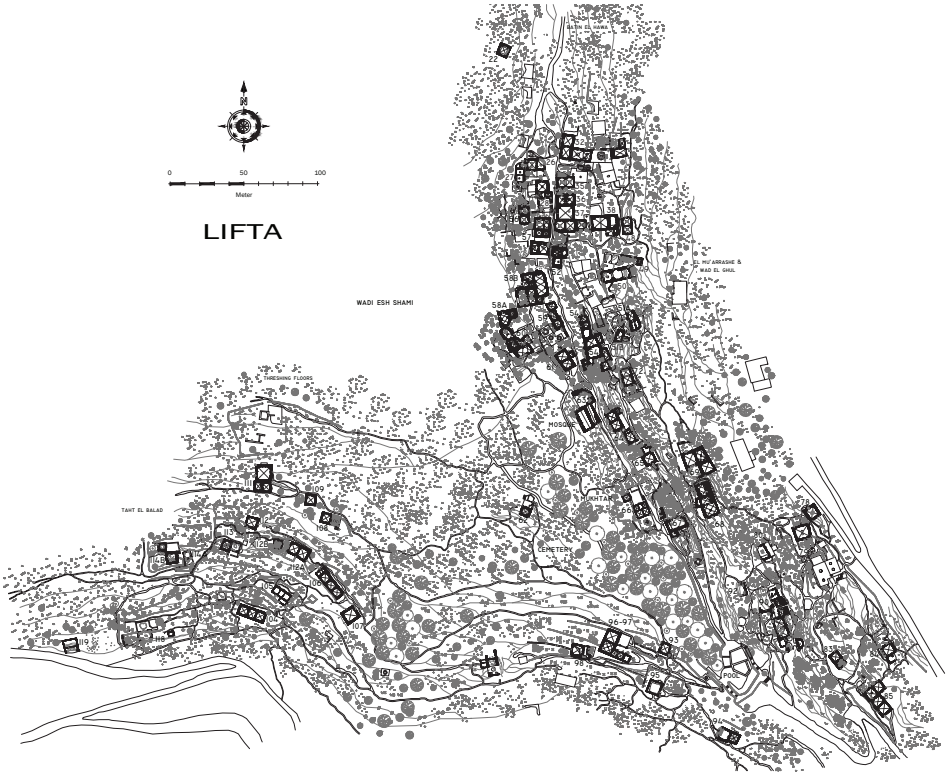

Figure 2. Lifta Plan (2015). Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

The valley that passes through Lifta lands from the north is known as Wadi al-

Shami. Wadi al-Shami can turn into a great river in the rainy season recorded in an Eric Matson photograph during the British Mandate, see figure 10). It is remarkable to note that most of the buildings are open to the valley through double windows (*mijwiz*), tripartite windows, balconies, or terraces, whether facing west (for the northern neighborhood) or facing north (for the western neighborhood). By looking into the urban formation of the town, we can safely conclude that the view over Wadi al-Shami was an important element that contributed to the clustering of the town in such way. With this primary parameter, entry to most of the houses was from the east or the south, with the west and north facades open to the exquisite view of the valley. The town ends at the northern side with cultivated terraces (*hawakir*) and the rocky slopes of Batn al-Hawa' (see figure 2).

Reading Loss as a Reclamation Process

While looking into the architectural survey and documentation of the remaining Lifta houses, I noticed a peculiar assembled house in the historic core of the town – building number 68, according to the Ramallah-based Centre for Architectural Restoration (Riwaq) survey team for the Lifta Documentation Project. I refer to it as "Veranda House 68," to emphasize the veranda as the most prominent element in the house (figures 3 and 4). An assembled house is a building that was constructed in stages and using different styles. In the Veranda House, presence and absence are manifested in such a way that the crime scene raises new questions about the Nakba, the ongoing Nakba of Lifta's heritage, and the role of ruins in shaping the present discourse.

The northern part of the Veranda House consists of two small vaults with a western entrance, perhaps the first part of this house that was constructed. The apparent antique quality of the large cut stones of the building below the veranda indicates that these stone courses were present before the construction of the rooms around and atop of them. A room to the south, and four smaller vaults to the north were later additions.

The first floor is simple in form: the middle part of the building forms a central hall (*liwan*) for the north and south wings and constitutes the heart of the house, a typology popular in urban architecture in the late Ottoman era. The first floor of the northern wing consists of two elongated vaults forming one space connected to the liwan and overlooking the valley via a smaller window. Several niches decorate the northern facade.

In the southern wing, its first floor has two entrances, one leads to the liwan and the other overlooks the southern side. The four first-floor vaults rest on a central octagonal stone column – the only structure of its kind in the town of Lifta – whose delicate work indicates the importance of this room. The room overlooks the valley through two decorated *mijwiz* (double) windows, one of which is missing the arches' keystones as a result of vandalism or looting. Similarly, the arches of the veranda are missing their decorative jambs and arches. There is a staircase ascending from the liwan toward the natural terraces on the eastern side, and it may have also led to the roof (figures 5, 6).

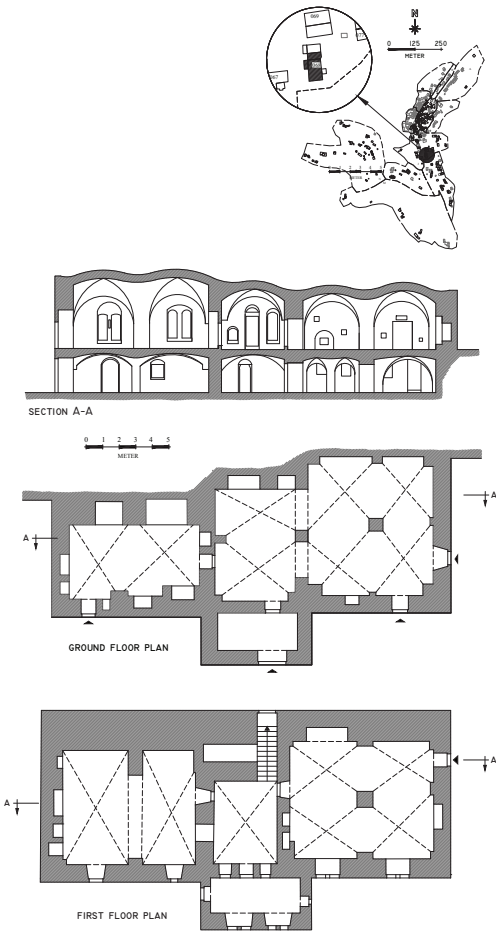

Figure 3. House 68, the plans. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

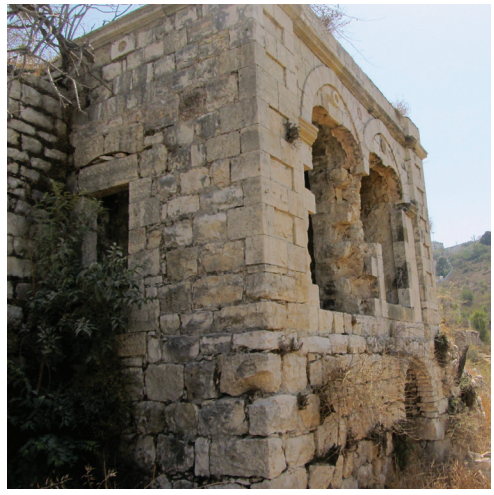

Figure 4. House 68, the veranda. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

Figure 5. House 68, missing arch key stones. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

The stone veranda has prominent framed windows and rose windows (*rozana*) above arched double windows. (The Veranda House boasts another set of arched windows, also circumscribed within a rectangular recessed frame.) A ceramic plate adorns the right side of the last stone course of the veranda. To further decorate the facade, a geometric ornamentation made of colored plaster was added into a carved stone located at a central spot above the veranda arches (figure 7).

Figure 6. House 68, the octagonal stone column supporting vaults. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

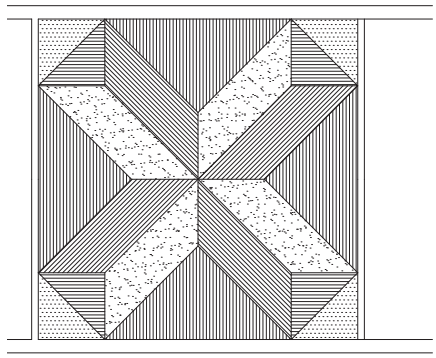

Figure 7. House 68, sketch of decorative elements of the veranda. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

68

The Veranda House 68 is a story of absence and presence, the presence of absence. What we see is an incomplete structure that we, as architects and archaeologists, could fill with architectural forms that blend with the rest of the frames. It is as if there is a blank page with a frame that is the limit for the writings. The text is erased and the reader is left with the task of writing a new one. Based on the experience of individuals, they write a different text every time they try to write or remember a text that has been cut off.[18] This authority that the individual assumes is what makes it possible not only to read the rest of the text (elements, frames, borders and structures), but also to complete the text, reformulate a story, rebel against form, and write an alternative ending for the story. In short, ruins appear, in the case of Lifta, as a call for writing a story of presence informed by the missing texts – an urge and responsibility to keep iterating a cohesive story made of disordered texts (figure 8).

Ruins as Texts, Writing as Social Agency

Undoubtedly, the systematic destruction, looting, and vandalism that Lifta's houses have been subjected to, especially affecting decorative stones, inscriptions, furniture, and iron and carpentry works, leave us bewildered, and perhaps unable to determine Lifta's architecture before the Nakba.

Here, it must be recalled that a town of this importance and located within the vicinity of urban Jerusalem – whose lands extend to Jaffa Street in the south and Nablus Street in the east, and is adjacent to the important Jerusalem–Jaffa Road – is featured in only two photographs in the Eric Matson Collection (the American Colony), hardly reflective of the importance of this photogenic town (figures 9 and 10).

We continue to address the methodological dilemma facing us of how to study

architecture and its aesthetics in the absence of most of the architectural details? It is not possible to analyze ruins or architectural remains without the elements and details that make architectural forms into lived and enjoyed places, apart from being an individual expression of the taste and the social status of the owners of the houses. Like dress codes and language, these aesthetic formatted shapes are the essence of the individual and his relationship to the material world and beyond. For example, the metal horseshoe, the blue glass eye, and the Qur'an verses are meant to protect owners from evil eyes; the star and the crescent represents the Ottoman flag and is a gesture of loyalty to the central authority; a ceramic plate in the center of a cross-vaulted room is a reflection of the wealth and generosity of the mukhtar; the sketched wheat and sunflowers mural paintings are evidence of hope for fertility and abundance, and so on.

In order to overcome the dilemma of missing artifacts and structures that give clues to the social and economic status of the Liftawis, I have studied all the details that survived looting and vandalism in order to reach reasonable conclusions about the details of the unusual architecture. In the absence of most architectural elements, every detail that survived becomes an approximation and speculation about Lifta architecture before the Nakba. The houses currently inhabited by Jewish settlers were excluded from this study, since they have been heavily altered and their original aesthetics obscured. They are mostly individual houses from the southern neighborhood (Taht al-Balad) or houses to the east of the town's historic core. If these houses could have been studied in detail, they might have revealed what

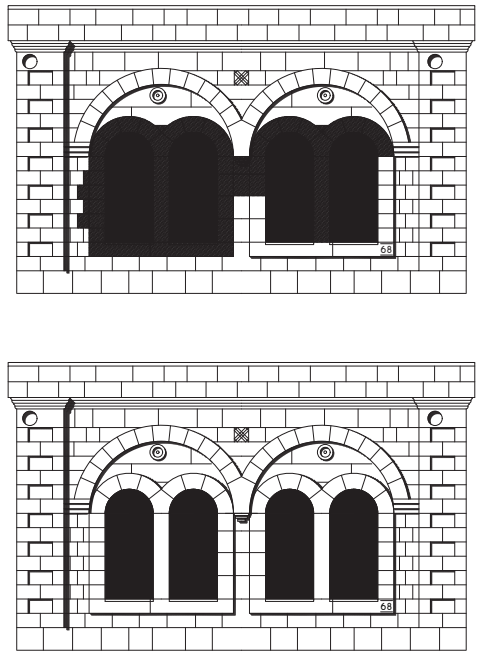

Figure 8. House 68, a reconstruction possibility of the missing veranda arches. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

Figure 9. "Lifta [?]." The photo was apparently taken at a distance from the northwest, the direction of Bayt Iksa village. Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

typical Lifta houses looked like before the villagers were displaced during the Nakba and the houses looted.

As absence helps us to infer *what was and what was not*, the ruins of Lifta indicate the presence of a larger number of decorative elements such as iron works, although most were looted, with only a few surviving. For example, House 62 contains holes for iron protection bars in the stone frames of the windows. It indicates that there were four pairs of steel plates that form a sandwich for a metal mesh made of solid square steel decorative bars, as we may infer from one of the remaining protection bars near the main door. What remains for us, as we observe the holes, is to try and fill them with our imaginings, our personal experiences, and our story. The holes in the window frame function as the grammar (the structure/ the language), while our imaginations are the texts/ speeches that we will write/ utter according to an agreed grammar (structural holes). Every time we try to write a text or utter one, it shifts its perception according to one's background and experience (and the haunting spirits of Lifta), leading to a different form in every writing/narration attempt (figures 11).

Figure 10. "Winter torrent, Lifta [?] Valley." This photo is of Wadi al-Shami on a rainy day. Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 11. House 62, missing protection bars. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

In House 28, we found a metal balustrade thrown into the upper level of a peasant

Figure 12a. House 28, decorated metal balustrade. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

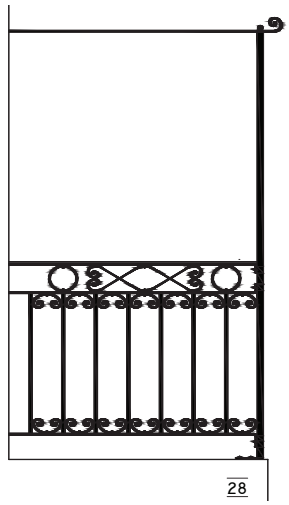

Figure 12b. House 28, sketch of decorated metal balustrade. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

house, probably part of a staircase railing. The balustrade is made of square solid steel bars resting on a lower steel plate and passing between two sandwich plates before it ends with a horizontal plate on top of a half-twisted steel bar. Does this masterpiece belong to House 28? It is quite impossible to assert such a claim; perhaps it belongs to another house or another staircase, and it was dragged until it reached a place where there was no suitable staircase to match. Here we have a written text (decorated metal balustrade for a certain set of stairs) extracted from a large book (the town), which consists of many chapters (the houses) and numerous pages (elements). We try to find the original place (provenance) of this text in order to restore the shredded segment of text to its original location in a huge library, with little certainty in sight (figures 12a and 12b). The same House 28 contains a window that is mostly missing but that reveals a sophisticated and delicately framed double window. The possibilities of writing a new text into the blank space are enormous (figures 13a and 13b).

Final Remarks

> Those traumatized by extreme events, as well as those empathizing with them, may resist working through [it] because of what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it. Part of this feeling may be melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by the traumatic past.
>
> — Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*[19]

Iqrit is a depopulated Palestinian village located at the northern border of present-day Israel. While all village buildings were reduced to rubble in 1948, the church and the cemetery survived. After long and exhausting legal processes, the descendants of the village, who reside in several villages and towns in northern Galilee, managed to obtain a court decision allowing them to celebrate masses every other week in the church. Moreover, they managed to wrest another decision to allow them to bury their deceased family members in the Iqrit cemetery. Unexpectedly, after decades of struggle, the Iqrit people were able to meet, hold weddings and barbecues, and play cards and football games on top of their ruined village. Although, surrealistically, one cannot return permanently to Iqrit unless one is dead, this right of return is one that I continually encountered with Lifta elders. They want to rest near their fathers, mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers at the graveyard of Lifta. Some Liftawis have the relocation of their coffins into Lifta's cemetery, when conditions allow, written into their wills.

Figure 13a. House 28, missing window. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

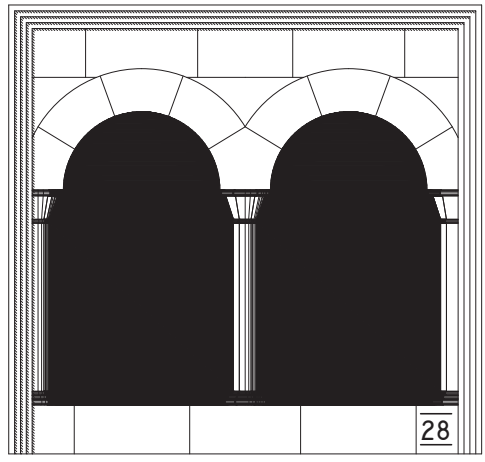

Figure 13b. House 28, a reconstruction possibility of missing window. Courtesy of Riwaq Centre: Lifta documentation project.

Lifta, the archaeological site, has been transformed into a living heritage site. A place where traditions are celebrated, memory is transmitted, and identity is reproduced. The young generations of Lifta are using all means at hand to make their fathers' and mothers' claims heard, whether it is through writing a social media post or conducting a guided tour among the ruins pointing to remaining features and bringing up the story of missing others. This interplay between presence and absence makes Lifta into a living heritage site. While the "living heritage" concept is concerned with surviving traditions and meanings of heritage sites, Lifta's ruins are testimony to traditions and meanings that unfold anew in every tour or writing exercise. Therefore, much of Lifta's archaeology is about the future rather than the past events, about a renewed commitment to save Lifta.

The everyday practices constitute a compensatory mechanism for the awaited return, which have been mobilizing Liftawis and others to save Lifta. Seasonal cleaning of the cemetery, holding weddings at the pool, Nakba commemoration days, conducting oral history sessions or publishing books have made the archaeological remains into a polymer that binds Lifta's displaced and dispersed descendants in a renewed social contract, whose ultimate focus is the notion of Return.

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Endnotes

1 See website of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, online at unrwa.org/where-we-work (accessed 17 May 2022).

2 Nazmi al-Jubeh, Rana Barakat, Khaldun Bshara, and Yacoub Odeh, *Lifta: sijjil sha'b – al-tarikh wa al-turath al-thaqafi wa-l-nidal* [Lifta: register of a people: history, cultural heritage, and struggle] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2020).

3 'Ayn Hawd and Kawkab Abu al-Hayja' are examples of villages that were held under martial law until 1966. Displacement, depopulation, and destruction of Palestinian villages in today's Israel were not identical processes. For example, in 1953, The village of Kafr Bir'im was destroyed by the Israeli air force in order to prevent the villagers' return and in defiance of an Israeli Supreme Court decision recognizing the villagers' right to return to their homes. By 1992, the only standing structure was the church and bell tower. Sha'b village is a different story; most of Sha'b's original residents became internally displaced refugees, settling in nearby Arab villages, predominantly in Majd al-Krum and Sakhnin. Meanwhile, many refugees from the depopulated villages of al-Birwa, al-Damun, and Mi'ar were settled in Sha'b in 1948 and were joined by refugees from Kirad al-Ghannam and Kirad al-Baqqara in 1953. The original inhabitants of Sha'b protested their circumstances and launched a campaign soon after the end of the 1948 war to return to their homes. By 1950, roughly 10 percent of Sha'b's original inhabitants returned to the village and eventually many more were given permission to resettle. 'Ayn Hawd village was not destroyed, but the Arab inhabitants were expelled during the 1948 war. Some remained in the vicinity and settled nearby, forming a new village, also named 'Ayn Hawd. After Israeli settlers' failed attempt to create a moshav on the site, Ein Hod (the original site of 'Ayn Hawd) became a Jewish artists' colony in 1953.

4 Yaqub Odeh, ""Lifta: qissat watan" [Lifta: a Story of Homeland] in Jubeh, Barakat, Bshara, and Odeh, *Lifta: sijjil sha'b*, 289–99. (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2020), 289–99.

5 Jeffrey Heller, "Jews, Arabs Nearing Population Parity in Holy Land: Israeli Officials," Reuters, 26 March 2018, online at (reuters.com) reut.rs/3KCSE1x (accessed 18 May 2022).

6 Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 146.

7 Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute Palestine Studies, 1992), *xxxii*.

8 See the Golden Rule Production, "The Biggest Robbery of the 20th Century (How the Zionists Stole Palestine)," online youtube.com/watch?v=LqxSMKHFnAs (accessed 30 January 2022). Ronny Shaked quoted

Azmi Bishara using the same terminology to describe the Israeli theft of Palestine in "Arab MK: Israel 'Robbery of Century'," *Ynetnews*, 18 December 2005, online at (ynetnews.com) bit.ly/3R5agFu (accessed 18 May 2022).

9 In *Citizens and Subjects,* Mahmood Mamdani shows how the colonial states aggregate the natives (that is, territorial segregation), then administer them through customary law (that is, institutional segregation) through appointed chiefs (63–65), and in so doing, the colonial takes over the land, destroys the communal autonomy (that is, subsistence economy), and "frees" individuals for wage labor ready for exploitation (119). Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63–65, 119.

10 See "Read the Full Jewish Nation-State Law," *Jerusalem Post*, 19 July 2018 (updated 29 July 2018), online at jpost.com/israel-news/read-the-full-jewish-nation-state-law-562923 (accessed 18 May 2022).

11 Yates McKee and Meg McLagan, "Forensic Architecture: An Interview with Eyal Weizman," in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Politics,* ed. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 440. "Forensic architecture" is the name of an emergent academic field that refers to the production and presentation of architectural evidence – relating to buildings, urban environments – within legal and political processes; see online at forensic-architecture.org (accessed 18 May 2022).

12 Mahmoud Darwish, *Fi hadrat al-ghiyab* [In The Presence of Absence] (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2006), 9.

13 Ioannis Poulios, "Recognising the Living Dimension of Heritage Sites," in Poulios's *The Past in the Present: A Living Heritage Approach – Meteora, Greece* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2014), 15–18.

14 Chiara Bortolotto, "From the 'Monumental' to the 'Living' Heritage: A Shift in Perspective," in *World Heritage: Global Challenges, Local Solu*tions, ed. John Carman and Roger White (Oxford: Archeopress, 2007), 39.

15 Bortolotto, "From the 'Monumental'," 41.

16 See, for example, Khaldun Bshara, "Heritage in Palestine: Colonial Legacy in Postcolonial Discourse," *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 9, 2 (2013): 295–319.

17 This article in general, and this section in particular, is informed by Khaldun Bshara, "'Alali 'ala wadi al-shami: nadhra tahliliyya ila ma tabqa min 'imarat Qaryat Lifta al-muhajjara" [Attics overlooking the valley of al-Shami: an analytical perspective on all that remains from the depopulated village of Lifta] in *Lifta: sijjil sha'b*, 227–75.

18 This act echoes Yalo, the protagonist of a novel of the same name (and also the name [Yalu] of one of the three Latrun villages destroyed in the 1967 war) by the novelist Elias Khoury, who tried to reiterate the same story to find himself writing a new one every time he tried to remember the same events; Elias Khoury, *Yalo* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2008).

19 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 22.